


FLAGSHIP PUBLICATION 2

# Leaving No One Behind: Impact of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



# Leaving No One Behind: Impact of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Flagship publication

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## See also the associated Foundational Research Report:

Hughes, B.B., Hanna, T., McNeil, K., Bohl, D.K., & Moyer, J.D. (2021). *Pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals in a World Reshaped by COVID-19*. Denver, CO and New York, NY: Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures and United Nations Development Programme.

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# Introduction

March 11, 2021, marked one year since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on societies, livelihoods of communities, and the wellbeing of families, redefining the overall everyday life of people all around the world. The Human Development Index (HDI) was estimated to suffer a “steep and unprecedented decline” in 2020 for the first time in the 30 years since the measure has been computed.<sup>1</sup>

With extraordinary scientific breakthroughs, vaccines are starting to roll out in some countries, but there remain significant inequalities in medium- to long-term recovery prospects, and new variants of the novel coronavirus threaten recovery.<sup>2</sup> Some countries may suffer from the medium- to long-term socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that are not yet fully understood.

In its support to governments and the UN System on the socioeconomic response to COVID-19, UNDP aims to “*help decision-makers look beyond recovery, towards 2030, making choices and managing complexity and uncertainty*”.<sup>3</sup> With this approach, UNDP focuses on SDG integration, linking immediate response efforts to medium and longer-term sustainable development needs and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

With futures modelling, policymakers can assess potential pathways for COVID-19 recovery by analysing how the impact of the pandemic can play out under different scenarios for key development outcomes. Scenario analysis helps policymakers understand the

scope of possible effects (or alternative futures) that the pandemic may have in the medium to long term and prepare them to adopt and implement inclusive recovery policies. This type of analysis can empower governments to turn COVID-19 from a short-term crisis into an opportunity for transformation towards sustainable development in the long term.

This report by UNDP, in partnership with the Pardee Center for International Futures at the University of Denver, is part of a series examining the impact of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a potential pathway for socioeconomic recovery from the effects of the pandemic. The analysis explores a range of possible future effects of COVID-19 on different aspects of development while also highlighting the benefits of bold choices that can power the global recovery effort, accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, and support investments that reap long-term benefits for sustainable development.

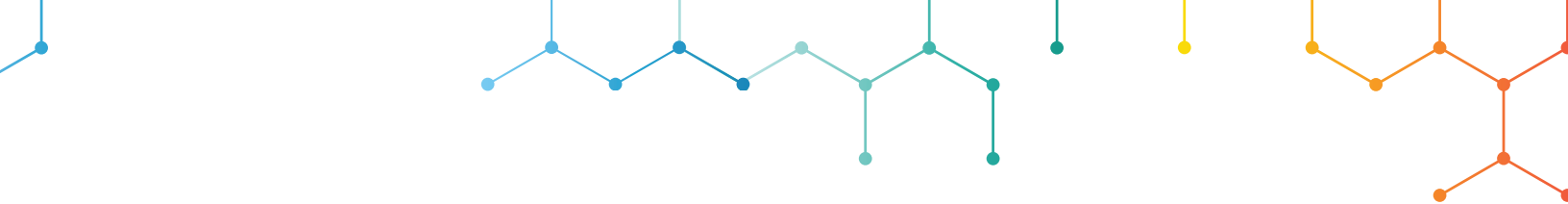
[The first flagship](#) report in the series looked in-depth at the impact of COVID-19 on poverty eradication efforts across the world. The study focused on assessing the potential impact of COVID-19 on the SDGs through three scenarios, capturing the multidimensional effects of the pandemic on extreme poverty over the next decades. The report found that an ambitious but feasible set of integrated SDG investments (simulated in the ‘SDG Push’ scenario) could exceed the pre-pandemic pace of poverty eradication, potentially lifting 124 million people out of extreme poverty and increasing the number of countries achieving the SDG target of

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<sup>1</sup> HDRO: COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/covid19-recovery-shape-economy-ceo/>

<sup>3</sup> UNDP: Beyond Recovery, Towards 2030, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hiv-aids/beyond-recovery--towards-2030.html>



eliminating extreme poverty, from 107 under a COVID Baseline to 118 with an SDG Push. The analysis also showed that the benefits are echoed across additional human development outcomes, including nutrition and education.

This second flagship report extends the analysis to the People and Prosperity pillars of the 2030 Agenda and focuses on 69 countries<sup>4</sup> in the low and medium human development groups. Pre-existing structural limitations and systemic challenges in their health and education systems, combined with porous safety nets and fiscal constraints, put low and medium human development countries at risk of being disproportionately impacted by the regressive<sup>5</sup> effects of the pandemic and left further behind in SDG achievement.

As a composite measure of a country's health, education, and standards of living, the Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>6</sup> offers a way to assess the threat that COVID-19 poses to well-being. An analysis by the Human Development Report Office (2020)<sup>7</sup> estimated that due to the pandemic-induced school closures or less effective distance learning, the effective out-of-school rate for primary education would rise to 86 per cent and 74 per cent in low and medium human development countries, respectively. The rates are high compared to 20 per cent in very high human development countries. Low and medium human development countries also face income and livelihood losses due to mandated confinement policies and other mitigation measures. At the same time, they are more constrained in the

policy space (fiscal and monetary instruments) to cope with the economic effects of the pandemic. 73 per cent and 78 per cent of low and medium human development countries respectively had announced policy responses (amounting to just 1 per cent of GDP on average), compared to 96 per cent of very high human development countries (amounting to 4.9 per cent of GDP on average).

While numerous studies exist on the impact of COVID-19, including the HDRO (2020) as described earlier, this second flagship maps out how COVID-19 might impact SDG achievement in low and medium human development countries, including in a worst case scenario with no or limited mitigation responses. It further examines the benefits of an 'SDG Push' scenario in addressing the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerating progress towards achieving the SDGs in these countries.

The results of our analysis show that by 2030, the number of people living in extreme poverty in the low and medium human development countries could increase to between 626 million under a 'COVID Baseline' scenario and 753 million under a 'High Damage' scenario. Under a 'COVID Baseline' scenario, 86 per cent of all people pushed into poverty by 2030 would live in countries with low and medium levels of human development, and 79 per cent under a 'High Damage' scenario. Of these, an estimated 41 to 169 million people will be directly pushed into poverty by the pandemic under the 'COVID Baseline' and 'High Damage' scenarios relative to the No-COVID

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<sup>4</sup> For this analysis we included countries in the low and medium human development groups, as per the Human Development Report 2020. This includes 33 countries in the low human development group (HDI score below 0.550) and 37 in the medium human development group (HDI score between 0.550 and 0.699). The IFs model does not include Kiribati, so it was excluded from the analysis. A total of 69 countries were covered, see annex 1.

<sup>5</sup> IMF, The pandemic has laid bare deep divisions, but it's not too late to change course, by Joseph Stiglitz, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/09/COVID19-and-global-inequality-joseph-stiglitz.htm>

<sup>6</sup> The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development—a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. Cutoff points to identify the human development grouping for countries are the same as established in the 2020 Report, namely a) Very high: HDI at 0.800 and above; b) High: HDI at 0.700-0.799; c) Medium: HDI at 0.550-6.999 and d) Low: HDI below 0.550. For more information see [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020\\_technical\\_notes.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020_technical_notes.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> HDRO: COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>

scenario, respectively, of which between 20 and 83 million would be women and girls.

Even though full SDG achievement was already elusive for many countries before the pandemic, countries with low and medium levels of human development stand to achieve accelerated progress towards the 2030 Agenda and reap significant benefits for their citizens from an ‘SDG Push’ through and beyond 2030. The ‘SDG Push’ scenario proposes targeted interventions in **inclusive green growth**, including integrated policy choices in **governance, social protection, green economy, and digitalisation**. It represents an ambitious but realistic effort that can mitigate the setback due to the pandemic and put countries back on a faster track towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

An ‘SDG Push’ could reduce the number of people living in extreme poverty in low and medium human development countries by 100 million in 2030 relative to the ‘COVID Baseline’ scenario and by up to 234 million people in 2050. It reduces population malnutrition by 70 million people in these countries, improves health outcomes by reducing maternal, neonatal, and child mortality rates, and improves educational completion and water and sanitation access. ‘SDG Push’ could result in five more countries achieving the target of eliminating extreme poverty (SDG 1.1) by 2030 than projected under the ‘COVID Baseline’ scenario, and twenty more countries by 2050. The benefits of an SDG Push can be seen in all the targets analysed in the study (see Table 1 in Annex).

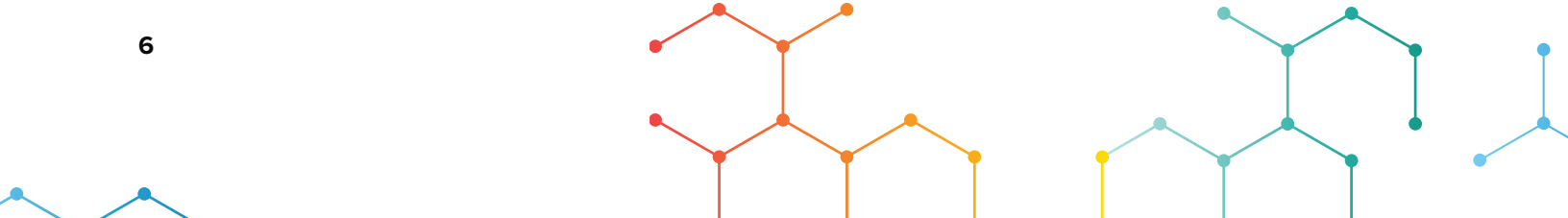
By 2050, countries categorised in low and medium human development groups **stand to gain on average 11 years of progress towards the eradication of extreme poverty from an ‘SDG Push’**, compared to

the ‘COVID Baseline’ scenario. It is noteworthy that low human development countries could potentially benefit more from the ‘SDG Push’ scenario in terms of poverty alleviation than medium human development countries.

A foundational research paper, [“Pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals in a World Reshaped by COVID-19”](#),<sup>8</sup> provides the extended analysis underlying this second flagship report. It is based on scenario analysis using Pardee Center’s International Futures modelling tool to examine potential pathways of the impact of COVID-19 on development outcomes: the impact of COVID-19 based on current trends of GDP growth and mortality (‘COVID Baseline’ scenario), a future with protracted economic recovery (‘High Damage’ scenario), and a potential path for accelerated recovery through focused and targeted policy investments (‘SDG Push’ scenario).

The research paper furthers the analysis of COVID-19’s impact on extreme poverty and extends it to the other SDGs in the ‘People’ and ‘Prosperity’ pillars of the 2030 Agenda: nutrition, health, education, and water and sanitation. The research paper also presents an initial exploration of issues relating to the ‘Planet’ and ‘Peace’ pillars, namely climate change and the risk of fragility due to internal conflict. Subsequent reports in the ‘COVID-19 Impact on SDGs’ series will examine the impact of the ‘SDG Push’ scenario on these SDG pillars in more depth.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, B.B., Hanna, T., McNeil, K., Bohl, D.K., & Moyer, J.D. (2021). Pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals in a World Reshaped by COVID-19. Denver, CO and New York, NY: Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures and United Nations Development Programme.





# Leaving No One Behind: A deeper look at COVID-19 impact in low and medium human development countries

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to affect low and medium human development countries disproportionately with potentially devastating impacts on the three dimensions of the Human Development Index – health, education and standard of living, including through socioeconomic effects of the virus and containment policies for the months and years to come. UNICEF estimates that more than 168 million<sup>9</sup> children have lost a full year of education because of school closures due to COVID-19 lockdowns, while data from UNESCO shows that education has been significantly disrupted for over 800 million students worldwide who lost two thirds of an academic year on average.<sup>10</sup> Estimations of global growth by the IMF showed that 2021 GDP would contract by 6.5 percentage points compared to pre-COVID-19 projections,<sup>11</sup> with an acute impact on low-income households.

Our analysis shows that because of the pandemic, there could be between 41 to 169 million people in extreme poverty by 2030 in countries with low and medium levels of human development, including 20 and 83 million women and girls. An estimated 24 to 86 million people in extreme poverty would be from countries in

the low human development group. The total number of people living in extreme poverty in low and medium human development countries would increase to a range between 626 million under a ‘COVID Baseline’ and 753 million in a ‘High Damage’ scenario.

COVID-19 could also increase the number of people suffering from malnutrition by 12.8 million in this subset of countries by 2030 compared to a ‘No COVID’ world. The number of malnourished children would increase by 1.6 million, totaling 57.5 million children by 2030 and about 60.5 million by 2030 under a ‘High Damage’ scenario.

However, with the ‘SDG Push’ investments, 100 million people in low and medium human development countries could be lifted out of extreme poverty by 2030, compared to the ‘COVID Baseline’ trend, and up to 234 million by 2050 (Figure 1). Up to 50 million women and girls could be lifted out of extreme poverty by 2030, a number that could reach 119 million by 2050.

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<sup>9</sup> COVID-19: Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost a full year, says UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/schools-more-168-million-children-globally-have-been-completely-closed>

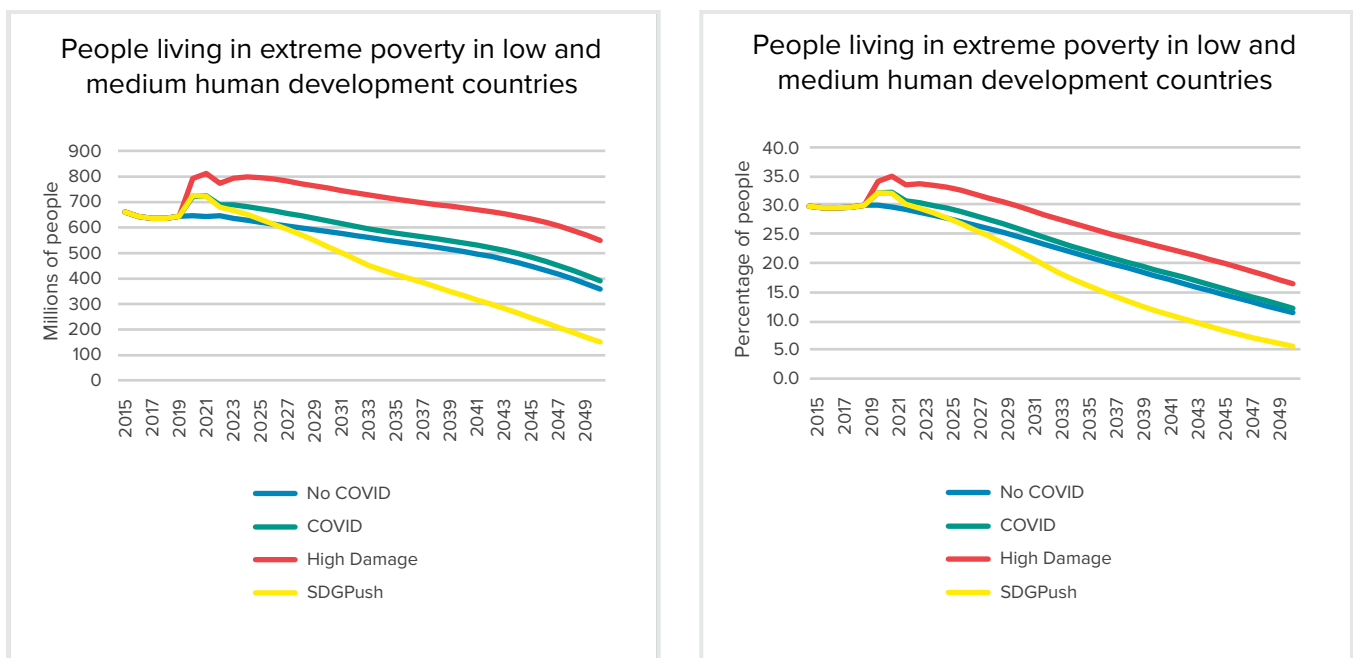
<sup>10</sup> UNESCO figures show two thirds of an academic year lost on average worldwide due to Covid-19 school closures, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-figures-show-two-thirds-academic-year-lost-average-worldwide-due-covid-19-school>

<sup>11</sup> IMF, World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>

Moreover, the benefits of the 'SDG Push' scenario also extend to other SDGs in the People's pillar. The number of malnourished people in low and medium human development countries could be reduced by more than 70 million by 2030 and 121.8 million by 2050. The number of children suffering from malnutrition could see a reduction of 13 million in 2030, compared to 'COVID Baseline'.

With an 'SDG Push', the proportion of people with access

to improved water sources increases to 93 percent by 2030 in low and medium human development countries, which is 2.5 percentage points more than in a 'COVID Baseline' scenario. Access to improved sanitation increases significantly, from 78.5 percent of the population under 'COVID Baseline' in 2030 to 84 percent as a result of the 'SDG Push' investments, which is an increase of 5 percentage points compared to a 'COVID Baseline' scenario.



**Figure 1. People living under 1.90 USD a day in low and medium human development countries**

Source: Based on results from the IFs model, version 7.61. The calculation includes 33 countries in the low human development group and 35 countries in the medium human development group. Two countries in the medium human development group were excluded from this analysis: Kiribati - not currently included in the IFs modelling database, and Equatorial Guinea, for which there is no updated poverty data.



# How many countries would achieve selected SDG targets with an ‘SDG Push’?

In its 2020 SDG Progress Report,<sup>12</sup> UN Secretary-General António Guterres warns that “*due to COVID-19, an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis is threatening lives and livelihoods, making the achievement of Goals even more challenging.*” The 2020 SDG Progress Report anticipates that COVID-19 will worsen food insecurity and reverse years of progress in access to education and maternal and child deaths. Our analysis, however, shows the potential of bold and transformative choices to put countries back on course towards achieving the vision of the 2030 Agenda.

With an ‘SDG Push’, by 2030 countries categorised as low and medium human development could make significant gains relative to the high human development group of countries for poverty, primary education, maternal and child mortality, and access to improved water sources. However, low and medium human development countries do not perform as well on the targets of reduction of malnourishment in people and children secondary education and improved sanitation groups (Table 1 in Annex).

Specifically, five more medium human development countries (about 45 per cent of the 11 countries predicted globally) would meet the extreme poverty target (SDG 1.1) than projected under the ‘COVID Baseline’ scenario by 2030. Three more countries would achieve the target for reduction of malnourishment in children compared to the baseline (21 per cent of additional countries achieving this target by 2030), and 56 per cent of additional countries that achieve the primary education

target with an ‘SDG Push’ would be in low and medium human development groups.

‘SDG Push’ still has a significant impact on access to improved water sources in low and medium human development countries, with nine more countries than in the COVID Baseline achieving the target (43 per cent out of the total of countries meeting this target with an SDG Push). Seven more countries (out of 24 in the world, or 29 per cent) increase access to improved sanitation to at least 97 per cent of the population by 2030. Furthermore, two out of four additional countries that meet the maternal mortality target (SDG 3.1) with an ‘SDG Push’ are in the low and medium development groups, and eight more countries (out of nine in the world) achieve the target on child mortality (table 1).



**Eleven medium and high human development countries that would not have achieved the SDG target on extreme poverty because of COVID-19’s impact could reach it by 2030 with the SDG Push scenario. These countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Grenada, Guyana, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Pakistan, and Philippines.**

UNDP Eurasia/Danil Usmanov

<sup>12</sup> United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>

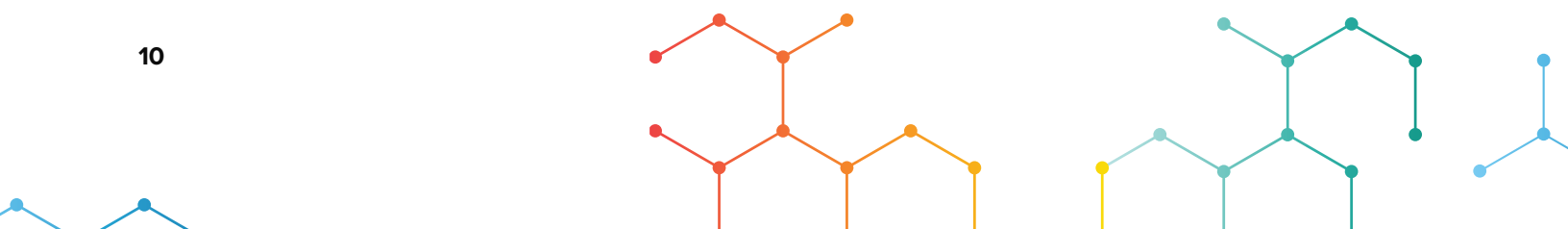
	Indicator	2030			2050		
		COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline
1.1	Less than 3% of the population lives on less than \$1.90 a day	8	13	5	25	45	20
2.1	Less than 3% of the population suffers malnourishment	0	1	1	1	25	24
2.2	Less than 3% of children under 5 years suffers malnourishment	2	5	3	8	24	16
3.1	Maternal mortality ratio is reduced to less 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births,	18	20	2	48	59	11
3.2	Reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births	22	23	1	40	55	15
3.2	Reduce under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births	20	28	8	54	65	11
4.1	Primary education completion rate of 97 percent or more	15	20	5	39	58	19
4.1	Secondary completion rate of 90 percent or more for secondary education.	0	0	0	1	8	7
6.1	Increasing access rate to improved water sources at or above 97 percent	15	20	5	41	66	25
6.1	Increasing access rate to improved sanitation at or above 97 percent	11	18	7	34	53	19

**Table 1. Number of countries achieving SDG targets by 2030 and 2050 under the ‘COVID Baseline’ and ‘SDG Push’ scenarios.**

Source: Author’s computation based on the results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement. Data is accessible via the [UNDP Data Futures Platform](#).

By 2050, the benefits of an ‘SDG Push’ are even more visible: forty-five countries with low and medium levels of human development could reach the SDG 1 target of eliminating extreme poverty, that is, twenty more countries compared to the ‘COVID Baseline’ scenario. Twenty-four more countries achieve the target of reducing malnutrition

(43 per cent of the additional countries in the world achieving this target with an ‘SDG Push’) and sixteen more countries or 59 per cent of the total additional countries achieving the reduction target for the prevalence of malnutrition in children with an ‘SDG Push’ would be in the low and medium human development groups.





# How many years do we gain with the ‘SDG Push’?

The COVID-19 pandemic is unleashing a human development crisis. On the three dimensions of human development – health, education, and standard of living, conditions today are equivalent to levels of deprivation last seen in the mid-1980s. The combined impact of COVID-19 shocks could signify the first decline and largest reversal in the Human Development Index since its inception, equivalent to erasing progress of human development of the previous six years. However, the ‘SDG Push’ scenario can not only help the world recover years of development progress that were lost because of the pandemic but also gain additional years in poverty eradication efforts (Figure 1).

Without a change in our efforts, the number of people in extreme poverty would be set back (increase up to 813 million in low and medium development countries) due to COVID-19, before declining to 465.5 million (37.5 per cent of the population) by 2030 in countries with low levels of human development and 161 million (6.4 per cent of the population) in those with medium levels of human development. However, with the integrated sets of targeted investments in governance, social protection, green economy, and digitalisation in the ‘SDG Push’ scenario, countries can reach those same levels of extreme poverty earlier. We estimate the number of years each country would gain in this new world towards the eradication of extreme poverty through targeted policy interventions and choices. The estimate is by tracking any country’s progress in by 2030 under the ‘COVID Baseline’ scenario and comparing it to the year in which this poverty level is achieved under the ‘SDG Push’ scenario.

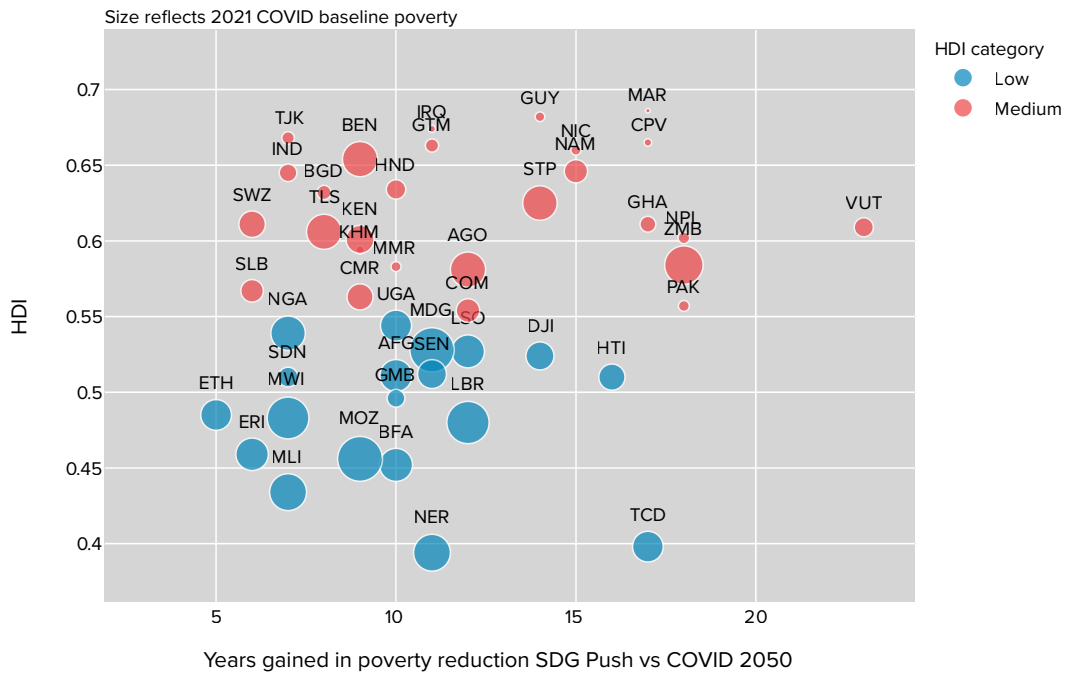
According to this analysis, as many as 16 countries could achieve their 2030 projected levels of extreme

poverty more than five years earlier, with ‘SDG Push’ showing the potential for accelerated gains in reversing the impact of COVID-19. For example, Madagascar could reach its 2030 projected extreme poverty rate under the ‘COVID Baseline’ already in 2025 with an ‘SDG Push’ and Kenya in 2026.

However, beyond the immediate gains of tackling extreme poverty with an integrated approach such as the SDG Push, countries with low and medium levels of human development stand to benefit significantly beyond 2030. All countries with low and medium levels of human development would be gaining a significant number of years in an ‘SDG Push’ scenario at an average of 11 years per country, compared to what they could achieve in a ‘COVID Baseline’ by 2050 (Figure 2). Namibia, a country in the medium human development group, would have waited until 2050 to reduce extreme poverty to 4 percent, but with bold choices in the ‘SDG Push’ scenario, the country is projected to reduce extreme poverty to this same level by 2035, a gain of about 15 years. Laos, another country with medium level of human development, effectively reaches the extreme poverty target by 2050 under the ‘COVID Baseline’. However, with an ‘SDG Push’, it could achieve the same level seven years earlier. More than ten countries are also estimated to accelerate progress towards the achievement of their extreme poverty reduction targets by more than fifteen years.



UNDP Colombia / Jurany Carabani



**Figure 2: Years gained in poverty reduction with an ‘SDG Push’ compared to the poverty rate achieved in 2050 under a COVID baseline.**

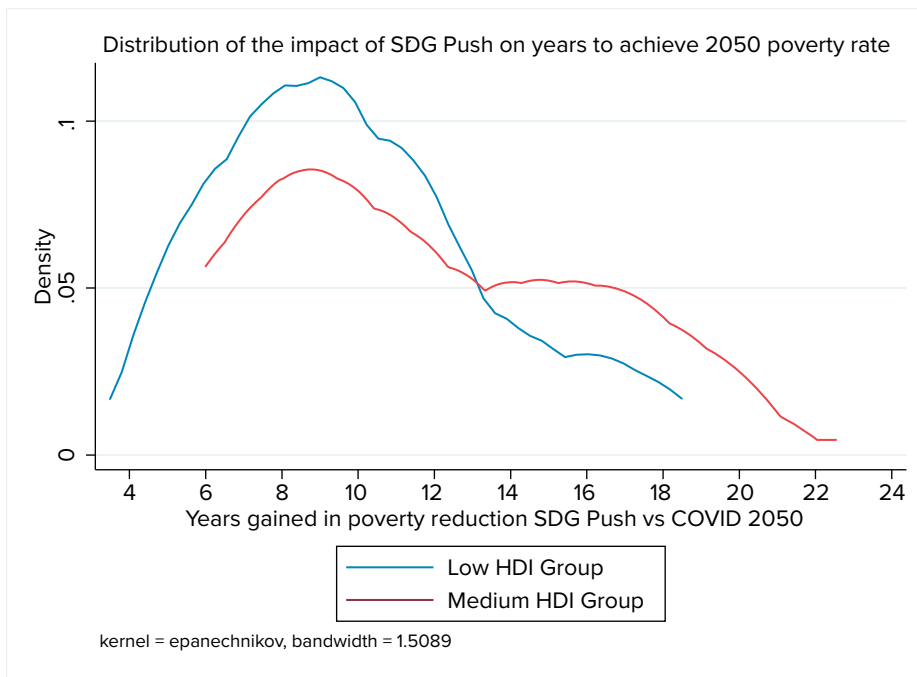
Source: Authors’ computation based on the results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement. Data is accessible via the [UNDP Data Futures Platform](#).

Note: The size of the bubble refers to the 2021 predicted extreme poverty rate for the country. Interactive data can be found at UNDP’s [Data Futures Platform](#).

Our analysis shows that, on average, low human development countries gain about one year less from the ‘SDG Push’ than those with medium levels of human development, and there is a difference in the distribution of the benefit for low and medium human development groups (See Figure 3). This further reinforces the importance of focused attention and targeted support to low human development countries, ensuring they are not left behind.



UNDP Guatemala / Caroline Trutmann



**Figure 3: Years Gained with ‘SDG Push’**

Note: The y-axis presents the approximated probability density  $f(x)$  from  $x$  - the number of years gained in poverty reduction. Kernel using epanechnikov with bandwidth of 1.5089.

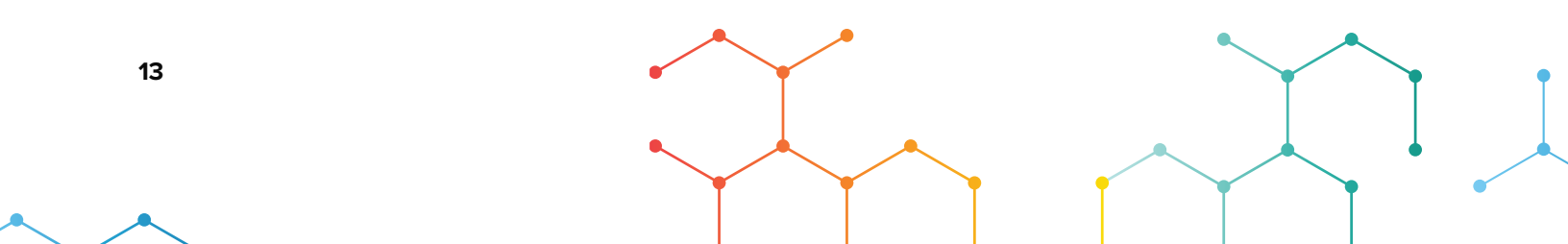
Source: Authors’ computation based on results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement.



UNDP PAPP / Abed Zagout



UNDP Iraq / Abdullah  
Dhiaa Al-deen



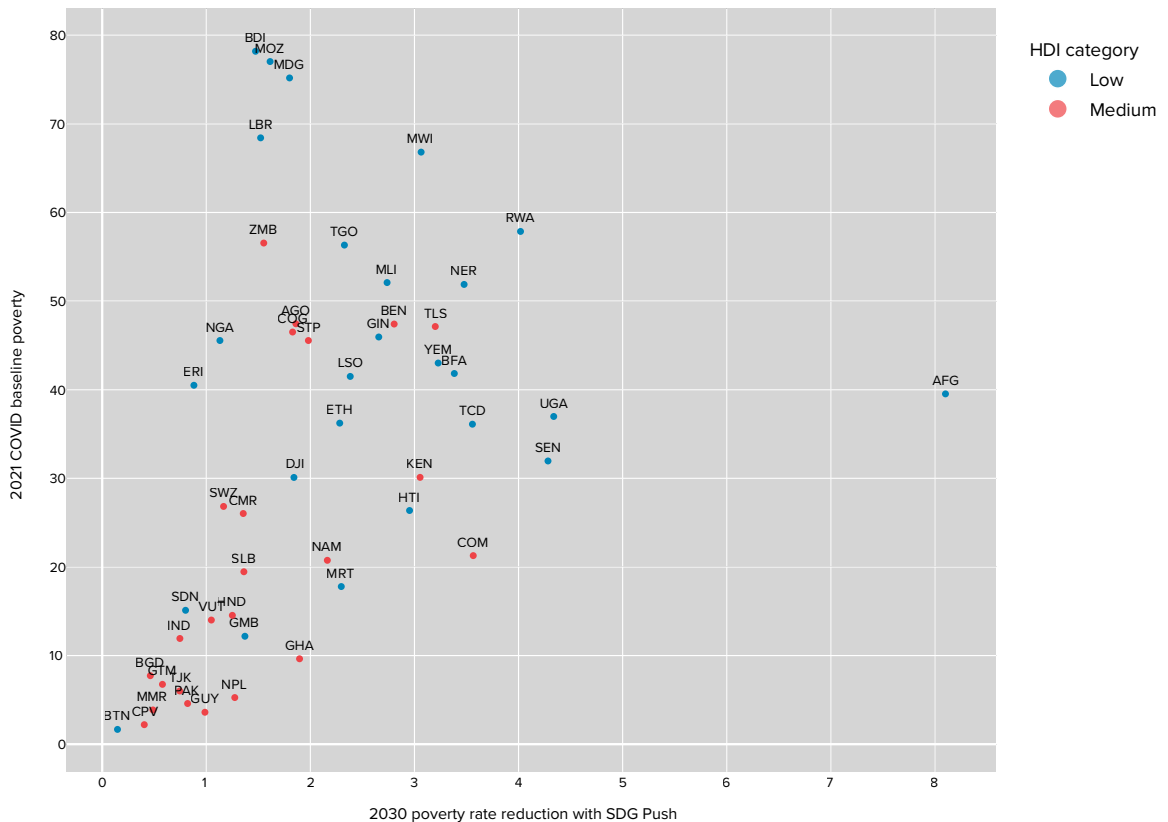
# Benefits of an ‘SDG Push’ for low human development countries

The UN’s 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report recommended short-term changes as steps towards sustainability objectives in the longer term, with transformative levers in individual action, economy, and finance, governance, science, and technology. It noted, however, that short-term efforts are often impeded by vested interests in the status quo or systemic resistance to change (business-as-usual).

With inclusive green growth at the forefront of the ‘SDG Push’ scenario, this research shows the

potential for quick gains in the short-term that can incentivise investments in behavioural and institutional transformations necessary for SDG achievement in the long-term. These quick gains can also differ between low and medium human development countries.

As depicted in Figure 4, countries with low levels of human development, including Afghanistan, Malawi, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Niger, could experience significant drops in extreme poverty. Afghanistan could experience one of the most significant



**Figure 4: Benefit of ‘SDG Push’ for extreme poverty alleviation in 2030**

Source: Authors’ computation based on results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement. Data is accessible via the [UNDP Data Futures Platform](https://data.un.org/DataFuturesPlatform).

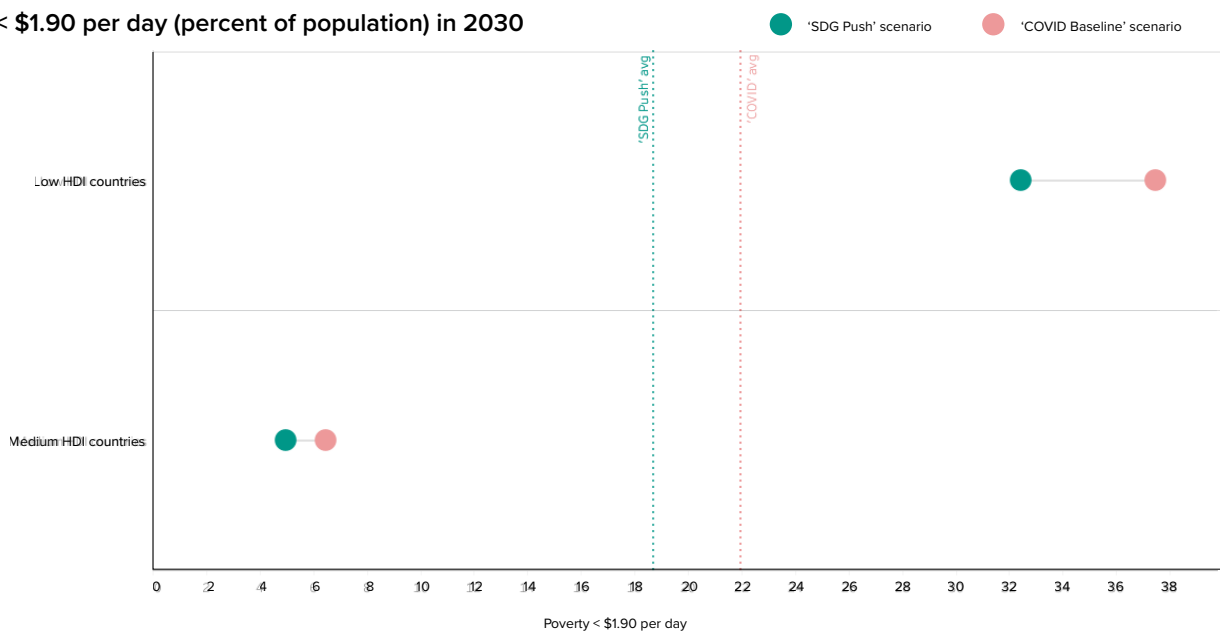
drops in extreme poverty in 2030 from the 'SDG Push', with about 15 percent relative to the 'COVID Baseline', while Malawi could reduce its extreme poverty rate by about 9 percent in 2030. In the group of countries with medium levels of human development, Timor Leste, Comoros and Kenya could also see a drop of about 6 percent in their extreme poverty rates in 2030.

Lastly, our analysis shows the potential progressive effect of an integrated package of inclusive green growth policies as simulated by the 'SDG Push' scenario. Low human development countries experience a drop of 5 percent in their extreme poverty rates by 2030 from 'SDG Push', compared to an average reduction of 2.5 percent for medium human development countries.

They significantly benefit from the 'SDG Push' relative to the medium human development countries (See Figure 5 below).<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting that even with 'SDG Push', no low human development country would achieve the global SDG target of eliminating extreme poverty by 2030, likely due to relatively high starting points in their extreme poverty rates. Nevertheless, with an 'SDG Push' they still stand to benefit from more significant gains in reducing their extreme poverty rates than medium human development countries. In other words, low human development countries will cover more ground on the path towards poverty eradication, lifting 62.5 million people out of extreme poverty along the way.

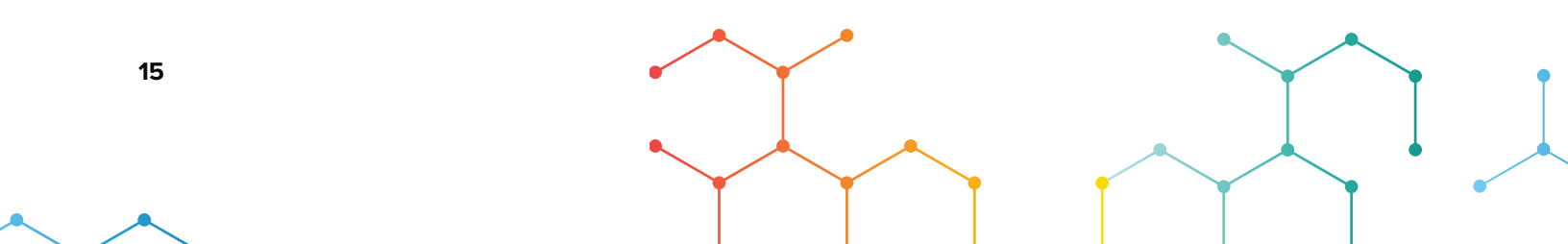
**Poverty < \$1.90 per day (percent of population) in 2030**



**Figure 5: Drop in poverty between Low and medium human development countries**

Source: Author's computation based on the results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement. Data is accessible via the [UNDP Data Futures Platform](#).

<sup>13</sup> Low human development countries see 62.5 million people (5 per cent) lifted out of extreme poverty by 2030 with an SDG Push, compared to 37 million (1.5 per cent) for medium human development countries. See regression analysis in Table 2 in Annex.





# Summary and conclusions


One year after a global pandemic was declared, much has been learned about SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, its biology, and its effects on people and societies. However, many uncertainties and unknowns remain. Through its first year, the virus has defied expectations and dumbfounded experts time and time again. COVID-19 has proven extraordinarily adept at exploiting the systemic flaws and weakest links in societies. Rich countries with arguably the best health systems in the world suffered unspeakable death tolls. In contrast, paradoxically, developing countries with weaker healthcare infrastructure did not witness the onslaught feared. Yet, they may still be impacted more by the resulting economic depression than by the virus itself.

effective vaccines and treatment options becoming available, access to them is unequal between and within countries. New variants of the virus, some more contagious and deadlier, are powering new waves of infections, hitting harder countries that so far seemed to have weathered the pandemic relatively well. One year on, the path of the COVID-19 pandemic is still unpredictable, and it will take years to register the magnitude of its socioeconomic impact fully.

While many high human development countries are vaccinating most adults, this is not the case in many low and medium human development countries. Without a clear recovery plan, the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to impact several dimensions of human development, including the fiscal base of countries where COVID-19 may not be affecting social interactions but rather economic sectors like tourism and movement of goods.

Far from offering a crystal ball into the future, the type of modeling and scenario analysis undertaken in this report empowers policymakers to begin to grasp the complexity of the challenge and be ready with relevant policy responses for alternative futures, identify and take urgent actions to prevent the worst outcomes, and turn the crisis into an opportunity for transformative change in societal and planetary systems towards sustainable development.

This second flagship report on the impact of COVID-19 on the SDGs shows that the 2030 Agenda remains relevant as a blueprint for targeting investments for the socioeconomic recovery through integrated policies that enable transformative and accelerated sustainable development progress. The report estimates the potential benefit of a bold 'SDG Push', an integrated



**Far from being the 'great leveler', COVID-19 accelerated pre-existing inequality trends and put a magnifying lens on the plight of the most vulnerable in societies who cannot afford to abide by confinement measures.**

UNDP / Grey Díaz

Far from being the 'great leveler', COVID-19 accelerated pre-existing inequality trends and put a magnifying lens on the plight of the most vulnerable in societies who cannot afford to abide by confinement measures. Even as there is growing optimism with



policy package focused on inclusive green growth – comprising interventions in improved governance, digital disruption, green economy and social protection – for reversing the negative effects of the pandemic on the sustainable development progress of low and medium human development countries.

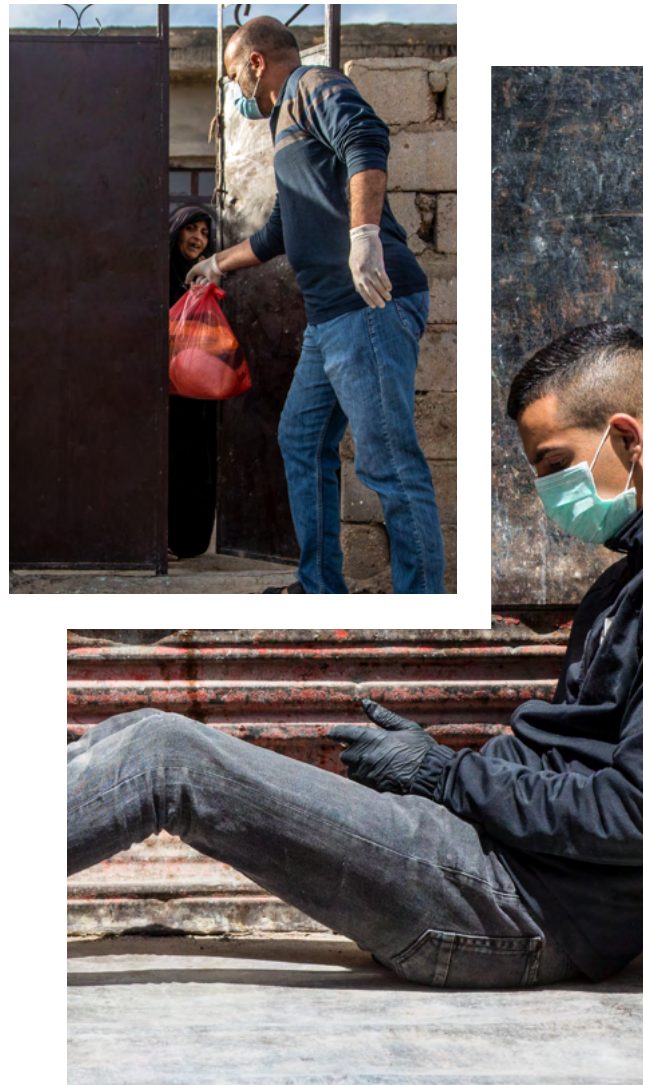
The impact is not equal across groups – low human development countries are estimated to benefit significantly more than countries in the medium human development group in terms of reducing poverty rate. This shows the potential of targeted policy interventions and support focused on inclusive green growth to contribute to the Leave No One Behind principle of the 2030 Agenda, by improving achievement prospects for countries at the lower end of the human development spectrum.

In addition to highlighting the benefit of the ‘SDG Push’ scenario for countries on the lower end of the human development spectrum, this report and the extended analysis with the Fredrick S. Pardee Center for International Futures also show that countries can not only recover from the setback caused by COVID-19 but can accelerate their progress on a range of SDG targets on poverty, nutrition, health, education, and water and sanitation. Even though many countries may not reach several of the SDG targets by 2030, a renewed focus on the 2030 Agenda in COVID-19 recovery efforts, through targeted integrated policies as simulated by the ‘SDG Push’ scenario, would bring them even closer to achievement than they would have been in their development trajectory prior to COVID-19, and in doing so would significantly improve human development outcomes for a large number of their populations.

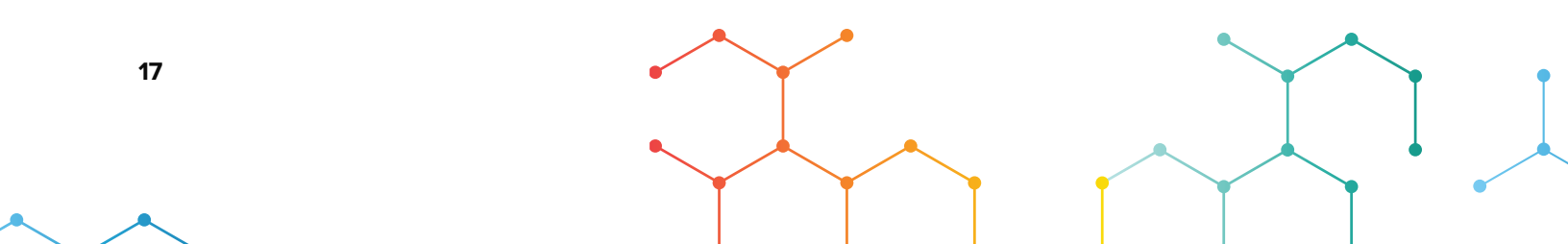
The ‘SDG Push’ scenario can be broken down into its elements, and those can usefully be explored and tailored for country-specific impact assessments and locally relevant policy scenarios to support medium- to long-term socioeconomic recovery from the pandemic and SDG achievement. UNDP’s offer of support to governments on the socioeconomic response to

COVID-19, “*Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030*”, will leverage ‘SDG Push’ to help countries identify the right mix of policy interventions to steer past the immediate crisis and build back better in the long-term.

Future work building on this project will seek both to tailor policy scenario analysis to specific country contexts and to expand further our specification of tools available for supporting progress on the 2030 Agenda, giving special attention to countries most at risk of being left behind.



UNDP Iraq / Abdullah Dhiaa Al-deen  
UNDP PAPP / Ahed Izhiman





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# Annex

Table 1: Number of countries achieving SDG targets by 2030 and 2050 under the 'COVID Baseline' and 'SDG Push' scenarios, all countries and low medium development countries

SDG Related Target	Indicator	2030						2050							
		World			Low and medium development countries			World			Low and medium development countries				
		COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline		
1.1	Less than 3% of the population lives on less than \$1.90 a day	107	118	11	8	13	5	134	158	24	25	45	20	45%	83%
2.1	Less than 3% of the population suffers malnourishment	61	78	17	0	1	1	74	130	56	1	25	24	6%	43%
2.2	Less than 3% of children under 5 years suffers malnourishment	63	77	14	2	5	3	75	102	27	8	24	16	21%	59%
3.1	Reduce maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births	124	128	4	18	20	2	163	175	12	48	59	11	50%	92%
3.2	Reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births	131	133	2	22	23	1	153	170	17	40	55	15	50%	88%
3.2	Reduce under 5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 births	128	137	9	20	28	8	167	181	14	54	65	11	89%	79%
4.1	Primary education completion rate of 97 percent or more	120	129	9	15	20	5	153	174	21	39	58	19	56%	90%
4.1	Secondary education completion rate of 90 percent or more	47	50	3	0	0	0	60	92	32	1	8	7	0%	22%

**Table 1: Number of countries achieving SDG targets by 2030 and 2050 under the ‘COVID Baseline’ and ‘SDG Push’ scenarios, all countries and low medium development countries (cont.)**

SDG Related Target	Indicator	2030						2050						Low and medium as a percent of total country achievement by 2030	Low and medium as a percent of total country achievement by 2050
		World			Low and medium development countries			World			Low and medium development countries				
		COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	SDG Push - COVID Baseline		
6.1	Increasing access rate to improved water sources at or above 97 percent	114	135	21	18	27	9	143	174	31	41	66	25	43%	81%
6.2	Increasing access rate to improved sanitation at or above 97 percent	92	116	24	11	18	7	130	160	30	34	53	19	29%	63%

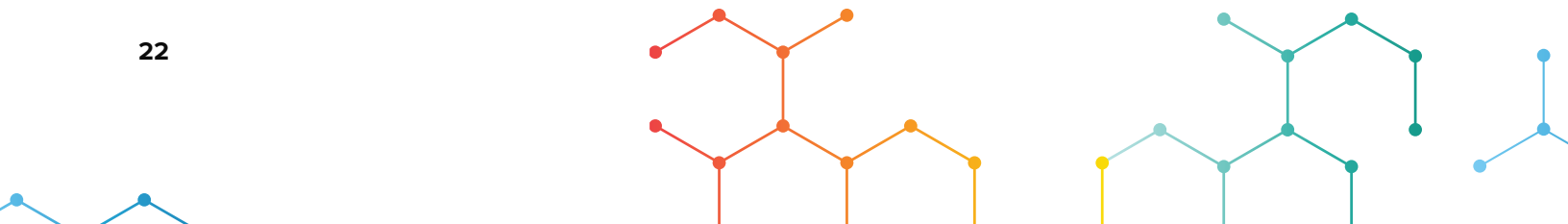
Source: Authors’ computation based on results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement. Data is accessible via the [UNDP Data Futures Platform](#).

**Table 2: Regression of the difference between poverty rate of ‘SDG Push’ and ‘COVID Baseline’ in low and medium human development groups.**

Variables	Gain (Poverty Reduction) of SDG Push by 2030
HDI category==Low	1.458** (0.710)
2021 COVID baseline poverty	0.041*** (0.015)
Constant	1.769*** (0.354)
Observations	68
R-squared	0.305

Robust standard errors in parentheses  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Source: Authors’ computation based on results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement. Data is accessible via the [UNDP Data Futures Platform](#).



**Table 3: List of low and medium human development countries included in the analysis**

No.	Country	HD level	HDI	No.2	Country	HD level	HDI
1	Afghanistan	Low	0.511	36	Liberia	Low	0.48
2	Angola	Medium	0.581	37	Madagascar	Low	0.528
3	Bangladesh	Medium	0.632	38	Malawi	Low	0.483
4	Benin	Low	0.545	39	Mali	Low	0.434
5	Bhutan	Medium	0.654	40	Mauritania	Low	0.546
6	Burkina Faso	Low	0.452	41	Micronesia (Federated States of)	Medium	0.620
7	Burundi	Low	0.433	42	Morocco	Medium	0.686
8	Cabo Verde	Medium	0.665	43	Mozambique	Low	0.456
9	Cambodia	Medium	0.594	44	Myanmar	Medium	0.583
10	Cameroon	Medium	0.563	45	Namibia	Medium	0.646
11	Central Africa Republic	Low	0.397	46	Nepal	Medium	0.602
12	Chad	Low	0.398	47	Nicaragua	Medium	0.66
13	Comoros	Medium	0.554	48	Niger	Low	0.394
14	Congo, Democratic Republic of	Low	0.48	49	Nigeria	Low	0.539
15	Congo, Republic of	Medium	0.574	50	Pakistan	Medium	0.557
16	Cote d'Ivoire	Low	0.538	51	Papua New Guinea	Medium	0.555
17	Djibouti	Low	0.524	52	Rwanda	Low	0.543
18	El Salvador	Medium	0.673	53	Sao Tome and Principe	Medium	0.625
19	Equatorial Guinea	Medium	0.592	54	Senegal	Low	0.512
20	Eritrea	Low	0.459	55	Sierra Leone	Low	0.452
21	Ethiopia	Low	0.485	56	Solomon Islands	Medium	0.567
22	Gambia	Low	0.496	57	Sudan	Low	0.51
23	Ghana	Medium	0.611	58	Sudan South	Low	0.433
24	Guatemala	Medium	0.663	59	Swaziland	Medium	0.611
25	Guinea	Low	0.477	60	Syria	Medium	0.567
26	Guinea Bissau	Low	0.480	61	Tajikistan	Medium	0.668
27	Guyana	Medium	0.682	62	Tanzania	Low	0.529
28	Haiti	Low	0.51	63	Timor-Leste	Medium	0.606
29	Honduras	Medium	0.634	64	Togo	Low	0.515
30	India	Medium	0.645	65	Uganda	Low	0.544
31	Iraq	Medium	0.674	66	Vanuatu	Medium	0.609
32	Kenya	Medium	0.601	67	Yemen	Low	0.47
33	Kyrgyzstan	Medium	0.697	68	Zambia	Medium	0.584
34	Laos	Medium	0.613	69	Zimbabwe	Medium	0.571
35	Lesotho	Low	0.527				

**Table 4: List of countries achieving the zero extreme poverty target by 2030 and 2050 per scenario**

	2030		2050	
	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	COVID Baseline	SDG Push
1	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Afghanistan
2	Bhutan	Bhutan	Bhutan	Bangladesh
3	Cape Verde	Cape Verde	Cape Verde	Bhutan
4	Cambodia	Cambodia	Cambodia	Cape Verde
5	El Salvador	El Salvador	El Salvador	Cambodia
6	Iraq	Guyana	Ethiopia	Cameroon
7	Kyrgyzstan	Iraq	The Gambia	Comoros
8	Morocco	Kyrgyzstan	Guatemala	Cote d'Ivoire
9		Morocco	Guyana	Djibouti
10		Myanmar	India	El Salvador
11		Nepal	Iraq	Eritrea
12		Nicaragua	Kyrgyzstan	Ethiopia
13		Pakistan	Laos	The Gambia
14			Malawi	Ghana
15			Morocco	Guatemala
16			Myanmar	Guinea
17			Nepal	Guyana
18			Nicaragua	Honduras
19			Pakistan	India
20			Papua New Guinea	Iraq
21			Senegal	Kenya
22			Solomon Islands	Kyrgyzstan
23			Sudan	Laos
24			Tajikistan	Malawi
25			Uganda	Mauritania
26				Morocco
27				Myanmar
28				Namibia
29				Nepal
30				Nicaragua
31				Niger
32				Pakistan



**Table 4: List of countries achieving the zero extreme poverty target by 2030 and 2050 per scenario (cont.)**

	2030		2050	
	COVID Baseline	SDG Push	COVID Baseline	SDG Push
<b>33</b>				Papua New Guinea
<b>34</b>				Rwanda
<b>35</b>				Senegal
<b>36</b>				Solomon Islands
<b>37</b>				Sudan
<b>38</b>				Syria
<b>39</b>				Tajikistan
<b>40</b>				Tanzania
<b>41</b>				Timor-Leste
<b>42</b>				Uganda
<b>43</b>				Vanuatu
<b>44</b>				Yemen
<b>45</b>				Zimbabwe

Source: Authors' computation based on results from the foundational research paper on the impact of COVID-19 on SDG achievement. Data is accessible via the [UNDP Data Futures Platform](#).